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ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the issue of access by disabled persons to the world of work, independence, and adulthood by defining the concept of least restrictive employment and presenting a framework for incorporating it into the public schools. Least restrictive employment is viewed as the placement of disabled youth in paid, integrated employment with the maximum opportunity for career advancement, job security, and job satisfaction. Vocational Skills Training and High-Visibility Low-Incidence Supported Employment are offered as program options for facilitating the implementation of the concept in special education and transitional programs. The approach stresses partnerships with private sector employers, attention to the issue of access to the adult society, and adherance to a set of basic guidelines which address the need for long range vocational goals, sequential vocational program options, and mastery of academic skills tied to occupational criteria. References and figures are appended. (Author/CL)

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Least Restrictive Employment: The Challenge to Special Education

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Abstract

Access to public education with nondisabled peers to the maximum extent possible has characterized the form and substance of special education since passage of Public Law 94-142. The current focus on the transition from school to work and adult life is a natural extension of the principle of least restrictive environment. This paper addresses the larger issue of access to the world of work, independence, and adulthood by defining the concept of least restrictive employment and presenting a framework for incorporating it into the public schools. Least restrictive employment is defined here as the placement of disabled youth in paid, integrated employment with the maximum opportunity for career advancement, job security, and job satisfaction. Vocational Skills Training and High-Visibility Low-Incidence Supported Employment are offered as programmatic options for facilitating its implementation into special education and transitional programs. The approach pivots on partnerships with private sector employers, attention to the issue of access to the adult society, and adherance to a set of basic guidelines which can be implemented in a cost-effective manner across the nation.

Least Restrictive Employment: The Challenge to Special Education

The least restrictive environment has been debated, litigated, and implemented in various degrees since Public Law 94-142 was enacted in 1975. To many educators, the least restrictive environment has become both a goal and a legal standard against which efforts to educate disabled students should be measured. It has been interpreted to be largely a civil rights issue, one of access not unlike the issues raised by Title IX for employment and athletic competition (Bebee, 1985). It is now estimated that 65% of disabled students in America receive their education in the regular classroom (Coleman, 1985). From 1976 to 1983, enrollment of disabled students increased six-fold (National Advisory Council on Vocational Education, 1983). Despite these gains in enrollment, the unemployment and underemployment rates for disabled adults is dismal. The unemployment rate has been estimated at 50%-80% (Will, 1984), and even conservative estimates put it at 5 times the nondisabled unemployment rate (Mithaug & Horiuchi, 1983). This data point out the need for Special Education to reevaluate its mission in favor of long-term preparation for adult life, work, and independence. Options which enable students to pursue realistic employment opportunities over the widest range of possibilities must be developed

if appropriate education for the disabled is to be extended to the world of work. It will not be enough to provide single-dimension employment options or operate a school-supported restaurant or greenhouse. The concept of least restrictive employment combines the access emphasis of the least restrictive environment mandate with the policies and goals of local school districts. School Board philosophies will usually include a global statement for all students similar to the following objective:

> To provide each person the opportunity to attain an occupational competence and economic responsibility consistent with his potential, interest and the economic structure of the community, employment region, state and country (Great Falls School Board Policies, 1970).

Public education is designed to prepare students to enter the work force, seeking employment which provides job satisfaction, job security, and opportunity for advancement and personal growth.

This paper presents two training models designed to facilitate least restrictive employment for disabled students with a variety of abilities. The High-Visibility Low-Incidence model is a supported employment model designed for severely disabled students who are unlikely to become competitively employed and the

Vocational Skills Training model prepares those students who are likely to become competitively employed for locally-referenced entry-level occupations. Other aspects of a least restrictive employment model are generic to all disabled students and are discussed later as guidelines. The training models are presented here as a foundation for a secondary special education program which has as its goal least restrictive employment, with maximum opportunity for career advancement, job security, and job satisfaction for each student.

Vocational Skills Training

The Skyline Vocational Training Project implemented this model in Great Falls, Montana, a city of 60,000 with a school district population of 12,000 in Northcentral Montana . Results of a community survey were compared with national employment projections, revealing that the employment area surveyed reflected emerging national employment opportunities (Rumberger, 1984). Thus, the occupations selected for Skills Training allowed for student mobility not only within the region but were representative of opportunities across the nation as well. The model was called Vocational Skills Training and it was defined as:

> Vocational Skills Training is preparing special needs youth for employment through instructional

formats which utilize proven special and vocational education procedures across the critical work factors of entry-level occupations based upon local employment opportunities (White, Smith, Meers, & Callahan, 1985).

Following a comprehensive assessment, students are targeted into one of the following training modes: direct placement in the private sector, training toward certification, work adjustment training to enter the work experience program, and supported employment training. Students in the first category are expected to develop the competitive employment competencies needed through the training provided by the employer on the job. The second category is expected to require some training away from the worksite to insure success in the private sector. The third category is for those students who are expected to require training in basic employability skills and work experience in school or community training prior to entering the private sector. The fourth category is for those students who are not expected to reach competitive employment proficiencies, and training at this level takes place only after a supported employment placement is developed. While several students may participate in the same lesson during training, each will be following an individualized program which will allow that student to attain the least restrictive employment available in the community.

Figure 1. describes the training options.

Insert Figure 1. about here

The program was restricted to learning-disabled and educable mentally retarded High School students, but the model was designed to be applied with other special needs populations, including limited-English-proficient and disadvantaged populations.

This model provides the mildly disabled student with a variety of options rather than a single-dimensional program. It provides professionals with a method for individualizing a student's vocational program, and for maximizing a student's access to the least restrictive employment option available in the local community. Recent efforts at expanding the student population served by this project resulted in the addition of the High-Visibility Low-Incidence Supported Employment model described below.

The High-Visibility Low-Incidence Model of Supported Employment

Unlike other Supported Employment models, the High-Visibility Low-Incidence model is designed to be primarily a time-limited public school program, and one that places the responsibilities for worksite supports to

industry, rather than adult service providers. Like other Supported Employment models, the critical elements of the model are paid employment, integrated work settings, the unlikelihood of competitive employment at or above the minimum wage, and the provision of whatever supports are necessary to sustain paid work for disabled persons (Federal Register, 1984). The model is built on three assumptions about employment for disabled persons.

First, disabled persons are seldom employed by larger, more visible businesses. Over an 18-year period in Great Falls, the vast majority of firms who hired disabled workers had fewer than 100 employees. These larger local businesses are the most visible, and placement of a disabled worker is expected to have considerable influence on community awareness of the abilities of disabled workers. The High-Visibility Low-Incidence model is an attempt to place disabled workers in Supported Employment with the larger "High-Visibility" employers at a "Low-Incidence" level or less than one per cent of the total workforce for any one company.

The second assumption is that businesses need to have "ownership" in any human service program if it is to become part of the integral day-to-day operations of that business. Under this model, businesses place workers on their payroll, select the supervisors from their own staff, and work withprofessionals in the analysis of the workplace and development of job descriptions.

The third assumption is that businesses need to have meaningful financial, structural, and human relations incentives if they are to participate in a long term venture. It must be in the best interest of each business to participate. Production should increase, effectiveness of nondisabled workers should be enhanced, and the operation of the business should be improved. While disabled individuals will continue to require certain supports to maintain employment, the High-Visibility Low-Incidence model is designed to allow each firm to "wean" themselves of the agency supports over time.

The model utilizes existing instructional and marketing methods to train on-line employees of large businesses to work with developmentally disabled persons in partial or supported employment. Over the long term, employers will no longer need expensive human service personnel to assist in worksites they have neither experience nor training in. Support services such as transportation, job coaches, placement specialist follow-up, adaptation of working environment, job analysis, tax credits, job modification, and payment of on-line supervisor salaries during after-hour training sessions will be provided by the public schools or adult service agency as part of the transitional program. The model is targeted to those larger businesses which have very few disabled workers (less than 1%), and which have a high

degree of visibility in the community. The business has ownership in the model because it selects the employee or employees who will participate in training. Morale is enhanced because an on-line supervisor receives inservice training sessions, and prestige for being selected as the individual capable of providing the most meaningful training to the developmentally disabled client. Adaptations of this approach can provide additional personal and financial benefit to the company and employee, including the offering of the training as an extension course from a state university or vo-tech center. The business will have numerous incentives which will be in the best interest for the company, including a systematic analysis of the workplace, a systematic discrepancy analysis (Brown, Shiraga, York, Zanella, & Rogan, 1984) for identifying individual deficits for instruction, wages that are tied to production, improved public relations, enhanced worker morale, additional support personnel faded only after supervisor or student competencies are met, and ultimate control over the process.

Guidelines for Implementing Least Restrictive Employment

Supported Employment, designed to provide access to the workplace for severely disabled individuals, also provides the flexibility for individuals across

disability groups to enter the world of work. The Vocational Skills Training model focuses the methodologies of Vocational and Special Education on employment rather than classroom access or one-dimensional vocational tracking. As these components are applied to the needs of individual students , six guidelines can be used to insure that the option selected is appropriate and least restrictive.

The first assumes that the Individual Education Plan (IEP) for all secondary special education students should be designed within the framework of long range vocational goals. All student IEP's are mandated to provide services within the context of the least restrictive environment, and it will require very little modification to expect those responsible for developing secondary level IEP's to examine long-range adult outcomes in their planning. All too often, a student's program is developed around the master schedule or the mainstreaming focus without regard to the the student's options upon graduation.

Secondly, a sequential set of vocational program options which transition students from sheltered to unsheltered employment and from pre-vocational to career-specific vocational training is necessary to maximize employment opportunities for those students capable of competitive employment. Students who are expected to require ongoing services to maintain employment should be

targeted toward community employment early, but for others, a sequential but time-limited set of options can provide the range of alternatives necessary to meet individual needs.A comprehensive program which provides training in employability skills in grades seven and eight, career exploration and shadowing in grades eight and nine, assessment and vocational skills training in 10th grade, and work experience and vocational skills training during grades 11-12 would provide such a sequence. Work experience itself should be sequential, and a variety of sheltered, community-training and private sector worksites should be developed and maintained as part of a comprehensive program. All of these options should be implemented within the framework of least restrictive employment defined earlier.

Thirdly, vocational programs should be selected on the basis of long-range options, and vocational education programs should be required to implement the specially designed instruction necessary for each disabled student to succeed. Vocational Education should prepare the students for employment as defined in the Carl Perkins Act, and any vocational or transitional program should include specially designed instruction as defined by the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. Students should not be scheduled into a vocational education class unless it reflects the long-range goals and unless the definitions of vocational and special education are met.

There has been considerable success achieved in terms of placements in regular and vocational education as a result of the requirement placed upon team members to implement each IEP in conformance with the least restrictive environment. By requiring the same team to approach secondary special education with these guidelines can prove equally effective.

The fourth guideline could be phrased "Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater." The 1984 Rumberger study noted earlier used Department of Labor data to point out that occupations with the largest projected absolute growth occured in entry-level occupations. Honig analyzed this same data and concluded that it would be "dangerous" to assume that entry-level occupations can be equated with low education requirements (Honig, 1985). He points out that history has demonstrated that new technologies inevitably require a higher level of education for all positions, including entry level. Mastery of basic communication skills, at least the four basic mathematics operations, spelling and problem-solving are essential and must be performed quickly on the job. Indeed, the Carl Perkins Act requires each State Plan to address the capacity of vocational education programs to improve the academic foundations needed to address the changing content of jobs. Any restructuring of secondary special education should require mastery of academic skills to the criteria

required by the occupation.

Apprenticeship programs rely largely on the Government Aptitude Test Battery (GATB) as a screening device, selecting only the top 20% for interviews. To prepare students with aptitudes and interests in these areas, academics must be stressed in relation to the vocational requirements of each occupation. This leads us to the fifth guideline, meaningful and outcome oriented curriculum selection.

The development of Individual Education Plans (IEP's) at the secondary level is frequently dictated more by the master schedule and course offerings than student needs. A set of decision point matrixes can assist the team in developing an appropriate IEP which considers the transitional needs for each student (Smith, 1985). Figure 2. presents a curriculum-screening process that can be applied to determine the appropriateness of the IEP at any grade or functioning level.

Insert Figure 2. about here

If essential areas of instruction are omitted, an "Irrelevant IEP" error occurs. If nonessential areas of instruction are included, a "Taxed IEP" error occurs. By measuring each program against the criteria of essential versus nonessential instruction, team members can reduce

extraneous instruction and focus on what each student needs . This provides input regarding current program effectiveness. The Likelihood-Impact matrix (Figure 3.) can then be used to predict outcomes and reach a consensus on specific future program content.

Insert Figure 3. about here

The final guideline for program development is comprehensive and meaningful vocational assessment. In terms of the growth occupations and vocational assessment for special education students, adequate instruments have been sadly lacking. For the most part, commercial instruments have been geared to manufacturing rather than service industries. The need to determine academic as well as performance standards of these growth occupations is critical for vocational and academic preparation of handicapped students. In addition, assessments with predictive capability need to be developed and implemented with special education students. For example, proficient motel housekeepers can strip and make a bed in five to six minutes. Do students who make a motel bed without training in ten minutes have the aptitude to become proficient motel housekeepers after training? Coordinated scheduling of psychoeducational and vocational assessments should be made to insure

timely and complementary results and reduce service duplication. A thorough vocational assessment can provide meaningful information to the team responsible for planning the IEP not only to select training options, but to exclude unnecessary options.

Discussion

If Special Education is to meet the transitional challenge of the 1980's, the same commitment to the IEP and the principle of least restrictive environment which carried special education during the 1970's must be applied to the long-term emphasis on actualizing least restrictive employment. Access to the world of work can be achieved by developing cost effective models similar to the vocational skills training and supported employment models suggested here. By definition, single option vocational training can serve only one disability group or prepare students for one occupational area. To meet the diverse career development needs of disabled students, diverse career opportunities will have to be provided.

The follow-up studies have pointed out that the decisions made at the secondary level have far-reaching consequences (Mithaug & Horiuchi, 1983). It is as much a tragedy to direct a learning-disabled student toward an entry level fast foods position when that student is

capable and interested in pursuing a career as a plumber as it is to unwittingly direct that student toward a four-year college program through an overemphasis on mainstreaming or enrollment in extracurricular activities at the expense of long-range vocational training and planning. Both options are inappropriate and reflect neither the intent nor spirit of public Law 94-142. Least restrictive employment, however, is consistent in all respects with 94-142, as well as the Carl Perkins Vocational Education Act of 1984, and is a logical outgrowth of legislation designed to open doors for a long denied segment of our population.

For Special Educators, least restrictive employment will require transition in our delivery system from short-term to long-term planning, and from cosmetically appropriate placements to substantive placements which enable students to reach their potential as the framers of 94-142 intended. Staffing patterns will need to be adjusted to accomodate such a framework, and preservice and inservice training will need to provide a much needed transitional focus which provides professionals with the needed expertise to work cooperatively with adult agencies and the business community.

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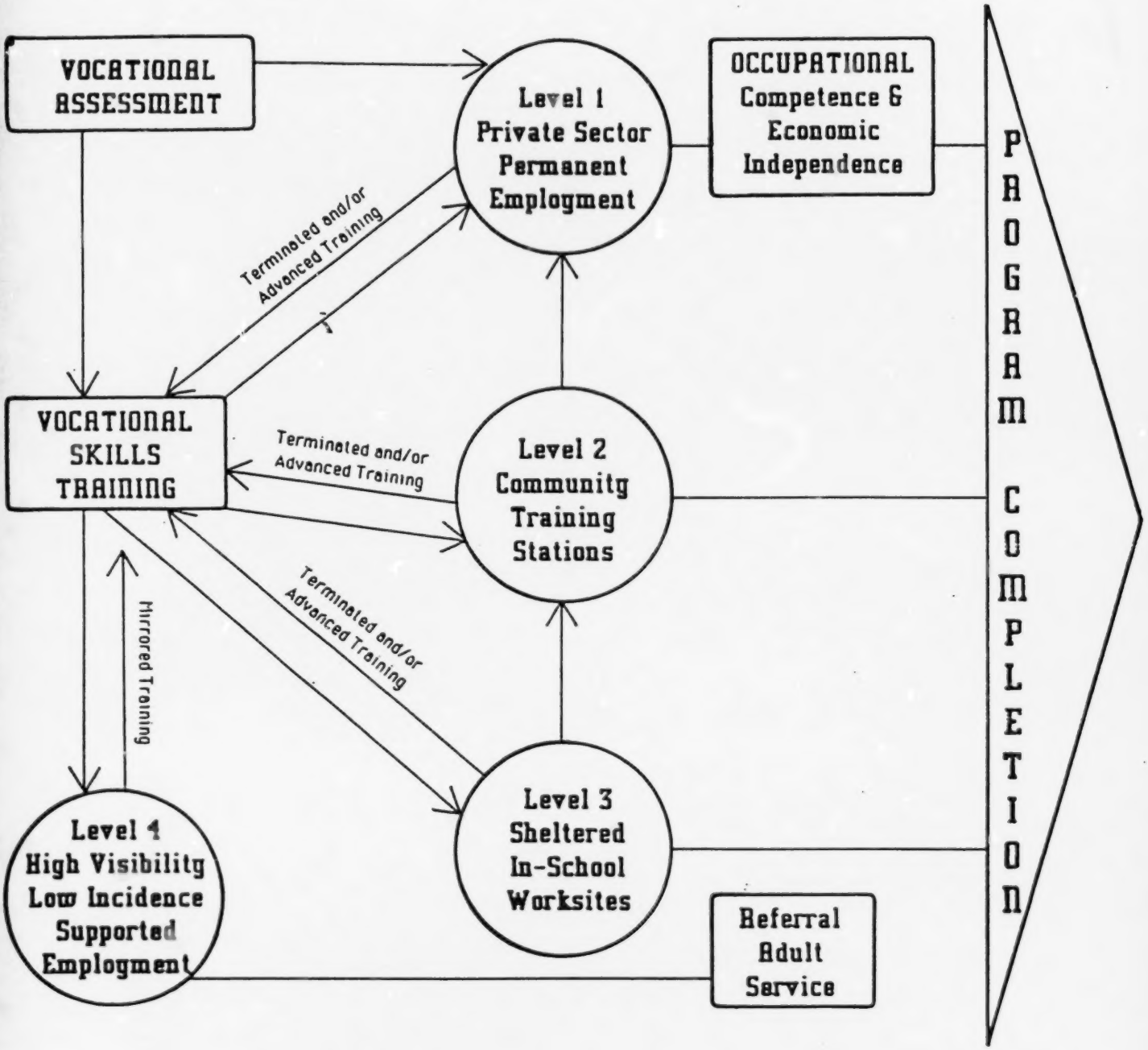
VOCATIONAL ASSESSMENT
Level 1 Private Sector Permanent Employment
OCCUPATIONAL Competence & Economic Independence
PROGRAM COMPLETION
Terminated and/or Advanced Training
VOCATIONAL SKILLS TRAINING
Terminated and/or Advanced Training
Level 2 Community Training Stations
Terminated and/or Advanced Training
Mirrored Training
Level 4 High Visibility Low Incidence Supported Employment
Level 3 Sheltered In-School Worksites
Referral Adult Service

FIGURE 1. Vocational skills training options.

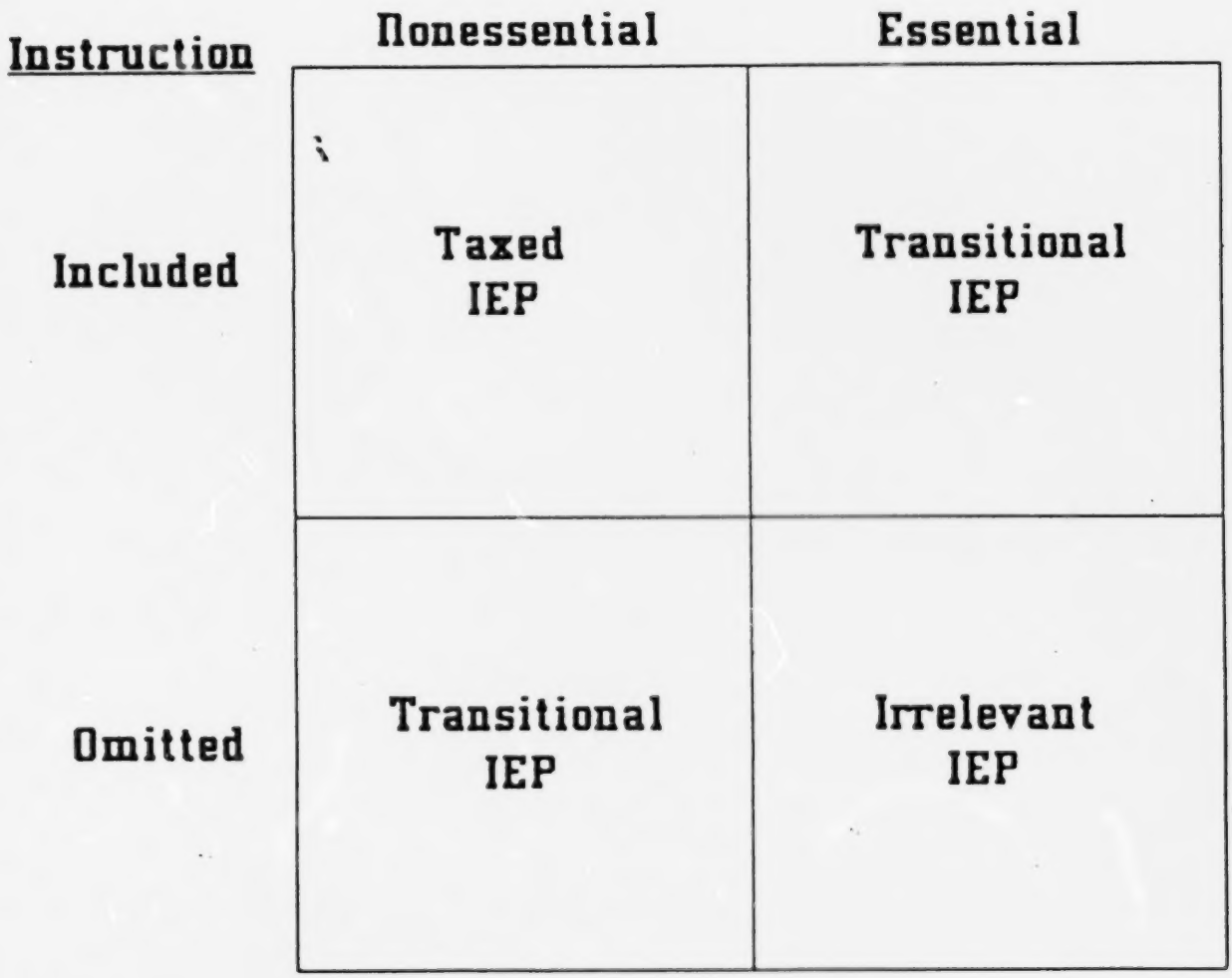

FIGURE 2. IEP Selection Matrix

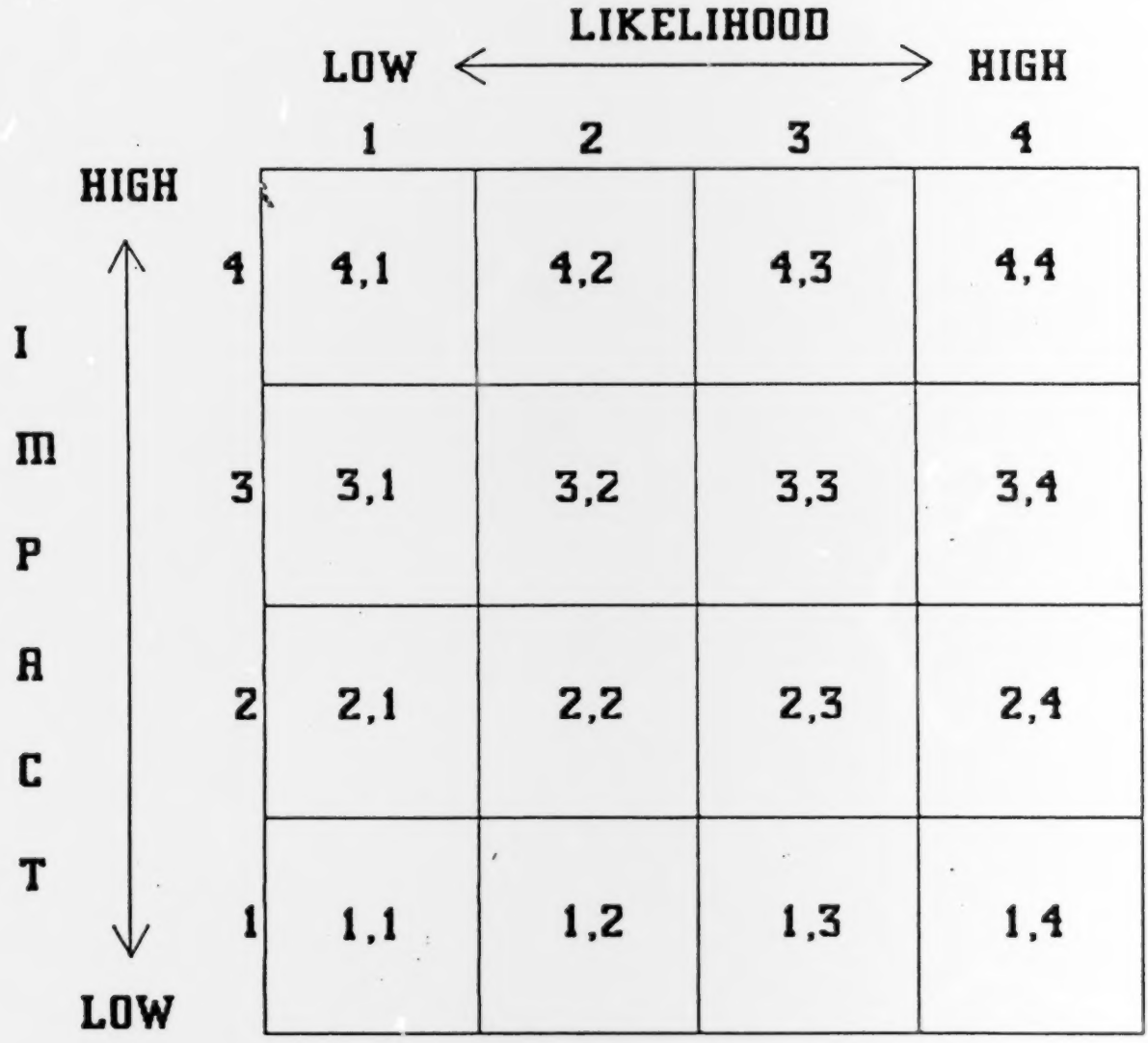

FIGURE 3. Likelihood Impact Matrix